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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISLAMABAD 000237

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SUBJECT: BAHAWALPUR: GROWING MILITANT RECRUITMENT IN
SOUTHERN PUNJAB

REF: LAHORE 302

Classified By: Anne W. Patterson for reasons 1.4 (b), (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: In discussing research findings for her new book on extremism, Dr. Ayesha Siddiqi outlined to A/DCM how a decline in the old socio-economic order in southern Punjab was slowly radicalizing the region. She described how a failing agricultural system, absentee landlords, poor education, and limited job opportunities for disaffected youth were giving Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) free rein to recruit militant fighters in Bahawalpur. Her description of JeM recruitment and training almost precisely echoed the Lashkar-e-Taiba operation described to the FBI by Mumbai attacker Kasab. Siddiqi, whose anti-military bias is well known, believes that the fact groups such as JeM can recruit so openly is proof of at least tacit support by Pakistani intelligence organizations. According to Siddiqi, rejuvenating the agricultural economic system, providing vocational education and job opportunities, and renewing the traditional Sufi-based social systems are the long-term solutions to ending extremism in Southern Punjab and preventing its spread into Sindh. Post is re-focusing USG development activities to address precisely these issues in southern Punjab and northern Sindh. End Summary.

¶2. (C) On January 15, A/DCM and Poloff met with Ayesha Siddiqi, author of "Military Inc," and an independent security analyst. In researching her upcoming book, Siddiqi spent a considerable amount of time in Bahawalpur, Punjab. Siddiqi herself hails from a village 11 kilometers from Bahawalpur and is the daughter of a long line of Sufi saints. She has inherited her family's religious mantle and carries significant weight with the local Barelvi and Sufi communities. The larger Bahawalpur district is in Southeastern Punjab in the Cholistan desert area. The economy of the region is predominantly agricultural, with pottery and textiles being secondary industries. Bahawalpur is part of the Saraiki-speaking belt of Punjab, which is commonly viewed as rural and traditional. Sufi saints and practices have long been venerated in the Bahawalpur region, with the more extremist Deobandi and Wahhabi influences being relative newcomers.

¶3. (C) Siddiqi said she was surprised during her research visits in Bahawalpur to see open recruiting and organizing for militant organizations. The predominant organization in Bahawalpur is Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM), one of the largest Kashmir-focused terrorist groups in Pakistan and one that

does not/not maintain a charity front. JeM was formed in 1994 by Masood Azhar as a splinter group from terrorist organization Harkut-ul-Mujahideen. Siddiqi claimed to have seen lists of "martyrs" who died fighting both in Kashmir and on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border; most of the names were boys from Bahawalpur and surrounding areas. Siddiqi added that many parents of the "martyrs" claimed that their sons had been taken unbeknownst to them, and had been indoctrinated and trained by JeM. This growing phenomenon of Punjabi boys fighting in both the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), Afghanistan, and Kashmir is part of a worrying trend.

14. (C) Siddiqi argued that the rise of extremism in Southern Punjab follows a common story across Pakistan. Serious economic problems and a failing agricultural system are causing growing rural poverty, she said. Many local elites, who traditionally solved the population's social and financial problems, have left for the big cities and are now absentee landlords. With very few job opportunities locally and the information age providing a window to the outside world, there is a growing sense of frustration among youth in the region.

15. (C) Siddiqi added most of the boys who join JeM attended government schools (not madrassahs), saw no future for themselves in Bahawalpur, and rarely informed their parents of their intentions. According to Siddiqi, JeM offers disaffected youth a way out of their small towns and some sense of power and adventure. The JeM infrastructure in Bahawalpur district is quite extensive, according to Siddiqi.

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Militants use madrassahs and their other facilities in Southern Punjab for planning, logistics, and indoctrination. Further training is often done near Kashmir or in the FATA. The operation she outlined almost precisely echoed that of Lashkar-e-Taiba, as described to the FBI by Mumbai attacker Kasab.

16. (C) Siddiqi observed that the local population is well aware of the JeM because of their ubiquitous wall chalking inviting people to join up. Most people are not in collusion with JeM but remain silent out of fear. Siddiqi believes the infrastructure is supported by foreign-financed madrassahs but also by local money from a newly-rich merchant class, which is trying to use JeM power to renegotiate old local power structures.

17. (C) Initially, during the Musharraf period, many of these militant networks had gone underground. Now, under the new civilian government, they have come back in full force with offices in every neighborhood, observed Siddiqi. Because of their ubiquitous and overt nature, Siddiqi believes the militants have at least the tacit support of the Pakistani military and intelligence agencies. She noted the Pakistan Army's 31st Corps Command is located in Bahawalpur, just kilometers away from what Siddiqi described as a JeM facility where Kalashnikov-armed guards are publicly visible. Siddiqi, whose anti-military bias is well known, echoed the common conspiracy theory that the intelligence agencies provide some of the militant training.

18. (C) Siddiqi believes that if there were not military support, cleaning up these militants in Southern Punjab would be a simple police action. However, the old mindset of the military prevails where militant groups can be used to successfully wage a proxy war with India. At the same time, local elements and disaffected people are using Wahhabi doctrine and madrassahs to renegotiate old power structures. The convergence of these two factors has caused a rise in militant recruitment. She recommended fixing the old social support structures that protected against religious extremism, such as Sufi religious leaders and charitable centers. Siddiqi also believes that new economic opportunities are crucial in providing young men motivation

to stay in school and stay away from violence. She warned that Southern Punjab has already been infected, but if things do not change, this could spread to rural northern Sindh as well.

¶9. (C) Comment: The story of militant groups successfully challenging the established socioeconomic order is not new in Pakistan. We have already seen how a similar breakdown in the tribal socio-economic order in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) contributed to increased militancy along the Pak-Afghan border. However, many believed this phenomenon largely was linked to local empathy with their Pashtun brothers in Afghanistan. The fact that Punjab youth are turning up among fighters, not just in Kashmir, but also in FATA and Afghanistan is a relatively new and troubling development.

¶10. (C) Whether or not Pakistani intelligence agencies are continuing past overt or tacit support for these proxy militant groups, the reality is that these groups are successfully challenging the writ of the government now in southern Punjab and northern Sindh. It will require both enhanced policing and expanded development to combat this spreading extremism. Post is re-focusing USG development activities to address precisely these issues in southern Punjab and northern Sindh. End Comment.
PATTERSON